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SUBJECT: POLAND: VICE PRESIDENT BIDEN'S ROUNDTABLE WITH
CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISTS

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In an October 21 meeting with the Vice President, a diverse group of Polish civil society representatives, including organizations active in promoting democratic transformation and empowerment of women and minorities, emphasized Poland's efforts to share its successful transformation experience with countries in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. Participants highlighted Poland's unique strengths and the challenges they still face.

Noting that Poland had benefited from SEED and USAID assistance in the 1990s, participants said Poland would welcome U.S. technical assistance and expertise to strengthen Poland's capacity to deliver development assistance to third countries. They expressed confidence that a U.S.-Polish partnership -- bringing together Poland's know-how and experience with U.S. resources and development expertise -- would bolster efforts to strengthen democratic institutions and processes eastward. The Vice President congratulated Poland for all it had achieved and encouraged Poles to continue to shift from thinking of what the U.S. can do for Poland to what the U.S. can do with Poland. He told civil society leaders that Poland is a leading example of how to transition successfully to democracy, and Poles should be confident in looking to themselves for guidance. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) PARTICIPANTS

United States

Vice President Biden
Ambassador Feinstein, U.S. Ambassador to Poland

Polish Civil Society

Jolanta Kwasniewska, Former First Lady of Poland and Founder, Communication without Barriers Foundation
Bronislaw Misztal, Executive Director, Community of Democracies Permanent Secretariat
Eleonora Bergman, Director, Jewish Historical Institute
Jacek Michalowski, Program Director, Polish-American Freedom Foundation
Dorota Mitrus, President, European Institute for Democracy
Mirella Panek-Owsianska, President, Responsible Business Forum
Paula Sawicka, President, Open Republic Association
Jacek Strzemieczny, President, Center for Citizenship Education

¶3. (SBU) The Vice President began the meeting by saying he had asked to meet with Civil Society Organizations because they have their fingers on the pulse of society. He noted the importance he had personally placed on Poland as a U.S. Senator, particularly his leadership in the Senate on Polish

membership in NATO. Biden said he had found it hard to believe that the U.S. commitment to Poland had been questioned in connection with U.S. efforts to reset relations with Russia. He noted that the world was at an inflection point and had changed utterly over the past ten years. The world will change with or without our input. We have a chance to bend the curve of history, Biden said, noting that Civil Society Organizations should be at the forefront of such efforts. A Europe "whole and free" is one of the two foundations of building a global security apparatus for the 21st century, and Central European countries are poised to play a leading role. He asked the participants to provide a sense of how Central Europe was developing and responding to changes over the past decade. The long-term success of Central Europe's democratic transition will depend on the spread of democracy eastward and ensuring that it takes root at home.

14. (SBU) Bronislaw Misztal of the Community of Democracies Permanent Secretariat said the Vice President had "come to the right place" to discuss promoting democratic change in Eastern Europe. He pointed out that Polish Civil Society Organizations are actively engaged in sharing Poland's experience and know-how with Eastern neighbors. Misztal agreed that the world had changed in the past decade. With a new architecture for international relations, the role of the United States would also change. He expressed appreciation for the Obama Administration's shift in focus on democracy promotion, and noted that, even though the "delivery service" had changed, Poland still had the requisite "parcel contents" to share with activists aspiring to democratic change in other countries. Misztal said next year's tenth anniversary of the Community of Democracies presented an opportunity to rethink -- and re-energize -- democracy promotion under the current challenging conditions. He reiterated that Poland

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has the experience and is looking for U.S. partnership and cooperation toward shared goals.

15. (SBU) The Polish-American Freedom Foundation's Jacek Michalowski noted that Poland had created a successful democracy and now feels a "moral obligation" to share its experience eastward. He stressed the need for greater coordination between the approximately 1,500 smaller Polish Civil Society Organizations working in Eastern Europe. Michalowski called for greater emphasis on three-country youth exchange programs, e.g., Poland-U.S.-Russia or Poland-U.S.-Belarus. Although NGOs run a number of small programs, exchanges on a much larger scale are urgently needed. Picking up on this theme, the Vice President agreed that more people -- especially young people -- need to be exposed to democratic systems to increase the chances that they become adherents.

16. (SBU) The Vice President asked how Polish Civil Society Organizations interface with counterparts in countries like Ukraine. While Polish organizations face stiff competition for grants and therefore work hard to identify effective partners, this is not always easy, Michalowski said. Biden noted that during his recent visit to Ukraine, which faces the dual challenges of Russian pressure and internal disarray, government officials had cited a lack of interlocutors from other countries as a complicating factor. The European Institute for Democracy's Mitrus questioned such claims, citing as one example her organization's efforts to arrange internships and exchange programs for Ukrainian government officials. As another example, she cited her NGO's project (funded by the UK) to enhance cross-border security cooperation between Polish and Ukrainian border guards, police, and customs.

17. (SBU) Mitrus said Polish Civil Society Organizations have an advantage promoting democracy in former Soviet states because "Poles have been there, too." As such, countries to the East more readily identify with Poland. However, Polish

NGOs have difficulty finding quality partners in neighboring countries -- they are there, but difficult to identify. She also stressed the need to move "beyond conferences" to practical action. She suggested experts from USAID could help the GOP and Polish NGOs address weaknesses in Poland's development assistance legislation and delivery mechanisms. U.S. expertise on how to build development assistance projects would be especially helpful, Mitrus said. The Vice President encouraged Mitrus and others to think beyond what the U.S. could provide to Poland and explore what the U.S. and Poland could do together as partners. (COMMENT: Participants afterwards told Embassy officers this was the first time a high-level Western official had effectively identified Poland as part of "the West," rather than Central or Eastern Europe -- a welcome development from their perspective. END COMMENT.)

¶8. (SBU) Eleonora Bergman of the Jewish Historical Institute (JHI) said that her Institute's work, while specialized, plays an important role in strengthening Polish democracy. By teaching about the history of Polish Jews and preserving Jewish memory -- not just for Poles but also for exchange students and teachers from the United States and Eastern European countries -- JHI is engaged in showing that democracy promotion is about opening up participation to voices that have traditionally been under-represented and even excluded. Noting his visit earlier in the day to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising memorial, Biden said he had been especially impressed by the efforts of non-Jewish Civil Society Organizations to promote Poland's Jewish heritage. "The fact that Jewish and non-Jewish organizations are sitting together in this meeting is a sign of how far Poland has come," Biden said.

¶9. (SBU) Picking up on the notion that democracy is about more than free elections, Jacek Strzemieczny of the Center for Citizenship Education (CCE) stressed the importance of promoting active citizenship. "We have to change attitudes," he said. CCE had moved beyond its early 1990s focus on civics classes to look at the broader educational experience. The key objective is empowering young people to take on the big challenges their societies face and to help students understand that people from different historical backgrounds can work together to solve problems. Biden agreed that education plays an essential role, suggesting that the key difference between the former Soviet Union and Western democracies during the Cold War was the emphasis the latter

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had placed on teaching critical thinking. He said the Obama Administration's "back to basics" approach worldwide is to focus on the transformative power of basic education. Biden agreed that elections are a necessary, but not sufficient, precondition for democracy. A free press, educated populace, democratic structures, and capacity to deliver basic services are also essential.

¶10. (SBU) Open Republic's Paula Sawicka commented that perhaps Strzemieczny and others had an easier task educating children in the value of tolerance, whereas her organization was faced with the more difficult prospect of working to develop these values in adults. She pledged her readiness to bring her wealth of experiences to the process. Biden noted that the most critical condition that Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic had to meet for NATO accession in the 1990s was to overcome concerns, on the basis of the experience of the past 70 years, about the treatment of minority groups. NATO is more than a security arrangement, Biden said. It is an organization based on shared values. While all Allies, the U.S. included, have work to do with respect to treatment and participation of minority groups, every post-Cold War aspirant country, including Poland, had to demonstrate its commitment to resolving difficult historical issues, whether border disputes or human rights concerns.

¶11. (SBU) Mirella Panek-Owsianska, a former spokesperson for Amnesty International Poland, told the Vice President she had solicited questions on Facebook for this meeting. She spoke of a great hope among her Polish peers for the U.S. to act as a true leader in the promotion of human rights. Panek-Owsianska said that Poles stand ready to be partners in this. The Vice President noted that these changes can be hard to achieve. In closing, former First Lady Jolanta Kwasniewska reflected that Poland and the whole world had been inspired by President Obama's message of 'hope.' She reiterated that the experience of the past 20 years had equipped Poland to share what it had learned with the rest of the world. The most important way to move forward was to "just do it."

¶12. (U) Vice President Biden's Office has cleared this cable.
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